

VZCZCXRO3597
OO RUEHIK
DE RUEHSI #2277/01 3570532
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 230532Z DEC 09
FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2628
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/OSD WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 002277

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [RS](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: GEORGIA: WWII MEMORIAL RELOCATION IN KUTAISI ENDS
TRAGICALLY - DRAWS CRITICISM

TBILISI 00002277 001.2 OF 002

¶1. (SBU) Summary/Comment: The planned relocation of a bronze Soviet-era memorial and destruction of its backdrop took a tragic turn when the explosion designed to demolish the backdrop killed two and injured others. The memorial was removed to make way for the construction of a new parliament building to accommodate a plan to move some parliamentary functions from Tbilisi to Kutaisi sometime in the future. A mother and 11 year old child were killed and several others sustained injuries from the flying debris. President Saakashvili immediately sacked the governor of the region but the ham-handed handling of the whole affair has given Russian critics more rhetorical fodder and sparked some small scale protests. Drawing on incorrect information that the whole memorial was slated to be demolished, Russian news sources have criticized Georgia's plans for the past few weeks. Kutaisi residents seem to be at a loss as to why and how the monument was destroyed and question the hasty nature in which the episode transpired. End Summary/Comment.

The Memorial at Issue

¶2. (U) The memorial consisted of a monument of a horseman and a 46 meter high backdrop commemorating those who fought against Nazis in WWII. According to MFA officials, the horseman was slated to be moved to a new site while the backdrop, a large stone wall, was to be destroyed. The relocation/destruction project was necessitated by a GoG decision to move some parliamentary functions to Georgia's economically depressed second city, Kutaisi, in order to stimulate economic and political activity in the region. According to press reports, the Russian MFA issued statements in advance of the relocation/destruction condemning the decision calling it "disrespectful" to WWII veterans. Local opposition groups in Kutaisi objected to the decision to relocate/destroy the memorial without taking into consideration the local population's views or the views of memorial designer Merab Berdzenishvili. The Georgian MFA issued a statement on December 18, criticizing the Russian statement and its "immoral habit of permanently interfering in other countries' internal affairs."

What Happened - Why

¶3. (U) On December 18, the horseman was removed for relocation to a different site and workers placed explosives at the bottom of the 46 meter backdrop. Local residents were supposed to have been evacuated, but not all got the message leaving a number in the area of the explosion. Flying debris struck nearby dwellings and residents injuring a number of people and killing a mother and her 11-year-old daughter. Local journalist Ketik Berdzenishvili (Radio Dzvili Kalaki) told Emboff that local residents were highly critical of what they viewed as a hasty, secretive decision to demolish the memorial and obvious disregard for proper safety measures.

Nato Gubeladze (Newspaper P.S.) told Poloff that residents support the relocation of Parliament to Kutaisi but are of the general opinion that the monument and new Parliament building could easily have fit without destroying the monument. Gubeladze noted that she had not met a single resident who supported the destruction of the monument. Gubeladze added that the memorial was in terrible physical shape but the decision to destroy it was at odds with local authorities' promises to restore the monument and surrounding park.

The Aftermath

¶4. (U) The press reported that President Saakashvili cut short his trip to Copenhagen to return to Georgia and immediately sacked the governor of Imereti region (where Kutaisi is located), Mikheil Chogovadze. Presidential spokesperson, Manana Mangaladze confirmed the dismissal was related to the "tragic incidents" but provided no further context. Chief prosecutor Murtaz Zodelava commented that "(a)ccording to the preliminary information, safety measures were not met" and stated that an investigation had been launched. The chief technician of SakPetkMretsvi, the demolition company hired to do the work, already has been arrested. The Georgian press publicized the statement from the Russian MFA calling the demolition "an act of state vandalism, insulting the feeling of any civilized person." It continued to call the destruction "a disgraceful act by the current leadership in Tbilisi in its maniacal drive to erase historical memories of its own people." The Georgian MFA has not released any statement since the explosion and the GoG has remained largely silent on the incident.

Protests Take a Strange Turn

TBILISI 00002277 002.2 OF 002

¶5. (U) A small group of non-parliamentary opposition protesters led by former PM Zurab Noghaideli (For Fair Georgia), Salome Zourabichvili (Georgia's Way), Koba Davitashvili (People's Party) and Gubaz Sanikidze (National Forum) traveled to Kutaisi to protest the decision to dismantle the monument. Speakers called on the GoG to restore the memorial and build an Orthodox church on the site to commemorate the death of the mother and child. Controversy erupted when a number of local Kutaisi residents started shouting at the Tbilisi-based opposition speakers not to "politicize" the issue for their own purposes and heckled them, telling them to return to Tbilisi. Journalist Berdzenishvili said there were more opposition activists at the sight than Kutaisi residents.
BASS